

A HISTORY OF ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL PARISH

The history of the Catholic community in Cape Town is worth exploring. There is much to celebrate in the generation before Dr Griffith arrived in April 1838, an event generally taken as the foundational date of Catholicism in South Africa.

Three Dutch priests landed in October 1805 under the auspices of Propaganda Fide, the department at the Vatican which (renamed) still guides and aids the Church in South Africa. They brought a quantity of religious artifacts including a painted altar-piece, liturgical books and vestments. Although here for only five months (deported when British forces re-took the Cape from the Dutch in 1806), their concern was not just the garrison and town but also the Boland and beyond. Propaganda Fide was anxious one of the three should learn something of the Khoisan languages and seek to evangelize the indigenous population.

The Dutch governor assigned them a building as a chapel and provided furniture, as well as paying two of them official allowances; but in January 1806 British forces commandeered the chapel as a hospital. In response, four Dutch Catholic laymen petitioned the acting-governor to allow the Catholic community to build, buy or rent alternative premises, undertaking at the same time to support all three priests; since the deportation went ahead, nothing came of it.

Plans for replacement clergy were blocked by the second phase of the Napoleonic War (1803-1815) and by the demands made by the restoration of religious liberty to Catholics in England. Not until 1818 could Propaganda Fide recommend the appointment of a bishop to the Cape (Edward Slater OSB), but the needs of the far more numerous Catholics on Mauritius disrupted an original plan for the bishop to live in Cape Town and he was sent to Mauritius instead.

Transiting at Cape Town in January 1820, he installed an Irish priest called Patrick Scully who soon initiated Sunday Mass at a storehouse on Buitenkant Street. Catholics in Cape Town, although not numerous, were influential, including the senior civil servant in the Colony (Christopher Bird), the acting French consul (Francois de Lettre), and a prominent Italian businessman (Antonio Chiappini) who was highly connected through his sister's marriage to a British noble.

By September 1821, Fr Scully had obtained a large plot (now a car-park, corner of Caledon and Harrington Streets) on which to build a church, priest's house, and school. Plans were published in November 1821, and building started in October 1822. Donations came from all the senior figures in the British administration as well as all non-Catholic clergy in the town. Unhappily, funds lagged ambition.

By March 1824, however, part of the house was habitable and the church was in use. It was remarkable for its time, and had it survived it would be the third oldest church in Cape Town after the Sending Kerk on Long Street, and the Lutheran Church, Strand Street. It was the first building erected in South Africa recognizable externally as a Christian church, bearing a large cross on the gable end.

We have an inventory of its contents where we find several of the items brought out by the Dutch priests in 1805, including books, sacralia, and the painted altar-piece the subject of which was the Flight into Egypt. One of the liturgical books has survived in the Archdiocesan archives, a "gradual" printed in the Netherlands in 18**.

Fr Scully did not enjoy these facilities long; he absconded from the Cape in July 1824. It was almost two years before a new priest arrived. During this period the laity continued the building works.

By 1828 the church had been enlarged internally with lateral galleries (for the many Irish soldiers on garrison) and accommodated 500. In the archives is a list of 246 who made their Easter duties in 1828 suggesting a Catholic population of about 800. Five years later a bell was hung. There are six known drawings of the exterior, and in a diary kept by a Dutch visitor in 1825 we learn of a composite scripture

text above the great west door: "do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you"

A timely admonition, because almost from the arrival of Fr Scully the community was vexed by rivalries, both as between clergy and some laity, and among factions within the laity, ostensibly centering on the debts incurred in building and improving the church but fuelled by deeper antagonisms which flourished for want of a commanding figure able to unite strong-willed laymen.

The written records allow us to discern three distinct parish councils: the first, elected by the community and approved by Bishop Slater in 1820, held office until 1826 when dissatisfaction with the new priest - Rev. Theodorus Wagener a Dutchman - caused them to resign. An English priest (a Benedictine named Thomas Rishton) came out in 1827. For five years there were two resident Catholic priests in Cape Town, one of them in receipt of an allowance from the Colonial Government. Throughout this period the Catholic community was rapidly changing in composition, with numerous Irish immigrants among the 1820 settlers - many of them poor labourers. Lay participation lapsed.

A second council held office from 1832 (when Fr Wagener returned to the Netherlands) until 1835 (when Fr Rishton was invalided back to England). The third council undertook the restoration of the church in 1836 and removed the roof; but before it could be replaced, violent and continued rainstorms collapsed the walls. The site, however, was valuable, and Bishop Griffith managed to sell it in 17 lots in 1840 raising nearly £800, or 8% of the eventual cost of St Mary's.

Viewed from the comparative calm of the early 21st century, their aspirations for a definite role are entirely understandable, and the Catholics at the Cape well foreshadowed the themes of co-responsibility and lay participation fostered by the Second Vatican Council and now enshrined in Canon Law. Bishop Griffith quashed these advanced ideas and imposed a more traditional model of Church governance. The outcome was inevitably a mixed blessing.

Early in 1839 Bishop Griffiths purchased the Wachtenburg Garden from Baron Von Ludwig for the sum of £2,500, together with a piece of ground in front known as Tanner's Square (Looyers Plein). Wachtenburg Garden had formerly been a Masonic lodge and then a museum and formed part of the larger Concordia Gardens. It is interesting to note that the open space on the west side of St Mary's, which links Plein Street and St John's Street, is still known as Concordia Place. St Mary's Dominican Convent and grounds stand today on the site of the Wachtenburg Garden.

There was a large room in the buildings which was suitable as a chapel, and it is easy to see that the deciding factor in Bishop Griffith's mind was that here was a site for the Cathedral: "One other great object", he writes, "might be gained by this purchase beside the chapel ... to wit, a large piece of ground in front, forming the place or space known as Tanners Square, sufficient and ample for building a Church. So I struck a bargain with the Baron" (Baron von Ludwig, the owner).

The sale was negotiated by Col. Bird, a former Secretary to the Government still resident at the Cape, whose good services were ever at the disposal of the bishop. A clause in the original grant forbade any building on this open site but permission to build was obtained from the Colonial Secretary. Here it was that on Sunday October 6th, 1841, the foundation stone of St Mary's Cathedral was laid.

Plans were drawn by a Mr Sparman, a German, whose first estimate of £5,000 was soon increased to £7,000. But a meeting of the congregation held on August 2nd, 1840 felt that to build according to his plans would cost at least £20,000 the architect was asked to reduce the dimensions in order to lower the cost. Mr Sparman appears to have been a difficult person to deal with and it required a stiff letter from the bishop to make him produce his final plans and specifications.

On August 16th it was decided to build according to his revised plans, and that he was to be paid £200 for his designs and supervision of the work.

Unfortunately there is no record of the foundation stone laying ceremony, nor is there any trace of the actual stone, if an inscribed stone was used. Perhaps it lies some feet below ground level on the Hope

Street side. The level of Hope Street was raised considerably later in the century and the ground on that side of the Cathedral was filled in to its present level.

The builder was Mr James Begley, a prominent member of the congregation. In order to raise funds for the new Church, the ground on which the old chapel in Harrington Street stood was sold in lots for £700, but a considerable amount of this was lost through the insolvency of the auctioneer. The Government was petitioned for help on the reasonable grounds that the Church would be used by the military but "nothing much was obtained except the remission of transfer duty and the loan of certain machines for the digging of the foundations." The fact that the Church was opened almost free of debt was due largely to the zeal of the bishop and his clergy and the generosity of the faithful, few and poor as they were. Besides the weekly subscription there were six large general collections. Charity sermons were preached, generally by the bishop himself. There is an interesting link with the Church in Australia in the fact that Archbishop Polding of Sydney preached when he called on his way to Australia. Donations also came from Archbishop Carew and friends at Calcutta, from Pernambuco and from the Vicar Apostolic and people of Mauritius.

Several times the work had to be stopped but the delays were never long and early in 1851 the Church was completed, only some of the necessary fittings and furniture remaining to be procured. The total expenditure at the end of 1854 was £10,377 3s. 6d.

The Dedication

The Dedication took place in 1851. The bishop writes: On Monday April 28th (the Feast of St Mary of the Flight into Egypt being transferred to it from the day before ... the 4th Sunday of April) the new Church was opened at 10am when the Bishop of Bourbon (Reunion) Dr Des Pres, and Vicar Apostolic of Mission in China, Dr Verolies, with two Vicars General of the former and five other French clergymen of their suites, assisted at the dedication, performed by the Vicar Apostolic, with all the clergy of this Vicariate, Fathers A. McCarthy, J. Griffith, B. McMahan, J. Watkins.

The officers and many of the crew of the French war steamer "Cassini" in which the bishops, etc. were proceeding to their respective destinations, were present and an overwhelming crowd of the people of the town. The ceremony commenced with a sermon and terminated with a Te Deum sung by the French clergy and officers, with four nuns and some French ladies, joined by our choir."

Bishop Griffith preached, taking as his text: "I have surely built thee a house to dwell in; a settled place for thee to abide in forever" (1 Kings 8:13), but unfortunately the local press dismissed the sermon with the unkind statement that "it occupied a considerable time in the delivery": and beyond that we know nothing. But whatever the words that were uttered on that occasion, we can be sure that the hearts of bishop, clergy, and faithful were filled with joy and with gratitude to God when they saw the completed home they had erected for their Eucharistic King. For the first time in the history of Southern Africa, Christ dwelt in a tabernacle that was worthy of Him, where the ceremonies of the Church could be carried out in their fullest details and splendour.

The Altar

In 1865 the sanctuary was completed and a new Altar of Siena, Sicilian and Galway marble erected to the memory of Bishop Griffith who died in 1862 and who is buried in the main aisle of the Cathedral. Bishop Grimley, his successor, was as indefatigable a beggar for St Mary's. Due to his zeal for the house of God, the large oil painting of the crucifixion, a copy of the original by Van Dyk, (in the Louvre, Paris) was presented by the Emperor Napoleon III in 1869, when the bishop called at Paris on his way to the Vatican Council.

This painting hung above the Main Altar in St. Mary's until 1949 when it was moved to its present position under the choir gallery. There is another interesting link with the house of Napoleon in the fact that the body of the Prince Imperial, killed in the Zulu War in 1879, lay in St Mary's while on its way for burial overseas. The mother of the Prince, the Empress Eugenie, later came to South Africa to visit the scene of her son's death and while staying at Government House, attended Holy Mass at the Cathedral.

The Bell

While in Rome at the Vatican Council, Bishop Grimley also approached the Marquis of Bute who was in the Eternal City at the time, and obtained from him the large bell which has sounded its call to prayer over the roofs of Cape Town so many times. The original plan provided for twin towers flanking the main entrance of the Cathedral, and the foundations for these were actually laid, but they were never erected and for years the bell hung on a tripod behind the Cathedral, until it was finally hung in the single tower erected over the main door during the renovation of 1927. The bell was cast by Sheridan of Dublin and weighed 22 hundredweight, (or 30 cwt. with the fittings.) On one side is the figure of Our Lady in relief; on the other the Irish Harp, wolf dog and round tower, wreathed by shamrocks with the words "Erin go bragh" underneath.

Windows

In the 1890's the organ gallery was enlarged, and due chiefly to the exertion of the late Mgr FC Kolbe. Towards the close of the century, stained glass windows, unrivalled in South Africa, were installed. The SA Catholic Magazine of June, 1896, tells us that "the East Window of St Mary's is about to be fitted with stained glass in place of the hideous arrangement of staring colours which was, at present, so painful an effect on the eye." The window depicting the Assumption of Our Lady, was made by Mayer of Munich and cost £265, when erected in September of that year. It was the gift of several members of the congregation, whose names are perpetuated on a tablet. Once again it seems to have been Mgr Kolbe who was the driving force in the beautification of St Mary's. A magnificent organ was installed. This did duty until September 1958 when it was renovated and improved. The renovation was completed in May 1959.

Mention must be made of the oak pulpit carved in Cape Town by a Scotsman named Tweedie and erected at the time of the Dedication of the Cathedral. The other stained glass windows followed in quick succession made by Messrs. Mayer of Munich and Hardman of Birmingham. The names of the donors are inscribed on each. The one in the baptistry of the Little Flower was erected in 1925, donated by the children, once again at the instigation of Mgr Kolbe. It is worth drawing attention to one of the finest windows, but rarely seen to be appreciated. It is the one above the organ, depicting the Descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost.

Renovation

As the years went by, St Mary's mellowed and gracefully grew old. Cape Town was changing its character in the streets around her. The open stoeps of the Dutch dwelling houses disappeared before the march of Progress. Streets were widened and paved. Shops and offices and factories began to surround her, but her massive mud packed walls still reared themselves against the fury of the south-easter and the blast of the north west gale. Seventy years had passed and the truth had to be faced that old St Mary's was showing her age. In 1926, one of the first acts of Bishop O'Riley, the first South African bishop to be consecrated within her walls, was to authorize Dr John Colgan, then Administrator of the Cathedral, to proceed with an extensive scheme of restoration and renovation. Mr F Glennie, a Catholic architect, presented a plan which, while renovating the Cathedral, preserved its essential character and left it St Mary's. The two side entrances were opened, a baptistry and sacristy were built on either side,

forming the arms of a cross; the nave was lengthened and two side chapels added. The whole west entrance was remodeled and the present tower erected over the main porch.

This work was carried out in 1927. But the old building was still St Mary's.

New Sanctuary

Another twenty years passed. Another bishop, Bishop Hennemann, was fired with zeal for the beauty of God's house. In 1947, the old sanctuary was so unsuited for the carrying out in full of the ceremonies of a Cathedral Church, and was remodeled. It was set back to the limit of the rear wall, and was paneled in oak, the carving being the work of a Spanish Catholic artist resident in Cape Town named F Cuairan.

A new altar of Italian marble, massive and simple, emphasizing the Table of Sacrifice and set off by the solid silver tabernacle completed the work. The whole was completed in 1950 as a memorial to those parishioners of St Mary's who laid down their lives in the World War 1939 to 1945. It was used for the first time for the consecration of yet another South African born bishop, Archbishop Owen McCann, the first Archbishop of Cape Town.

Consecration

On Saturday 21st April 1951, one hundred years after the dedication, the Cathedral was consecrated by Archbishop Owen McCann, who later, on the 22nd of February 1965, became the first Cardinal in South Africa.

In 1966 a new floor and new benches were put into the Cathedral.

On the 12th March 1976 the altar table was moved forward to comply with the modern liturgy to enable the celebrant to face the congregation.

Stations of the Cross

In 1962 Miss Maud Sumner painted the stations of the Cross for the Cathedral. Mrs A Power donated these Stations in memory of her husband Mr P Power. Miss Sumner explained her conception of the fourteen Stations as follows:

"My idea is to get away from the usual machine made plaques in which Roman soldiers, with whips and ropes, more or less predominate. My intention is to turn the focus on to Christ rather - in the idiom of the modern cinema; (for example, there are two 'close ups'). I want to show it as His Saga with the condemnation journey and death of the Hero, giving the spectators the impression that they are actually following Him on the road to Calvary, rather than standing in a church looking at pictures all of the same size and same emotional content (or non content!) To do this I have varied the size of the Christ figure. When He is near us He looks larger, and gets smaller as we are jostled back by the crowd. But near or far, we follow and accompany Him on this journey from Pilate to the tomb.

This takes some time. The light changes and gets darker; the lights on the clothes, faces, halos and cross are different in each station, with the different emotion (expressed in colour) that belongs to each different

Similarly the structural lines (the lines of the drawing and composition) and the basic forms are used to express the action or the mood; e.g. the lines rise as the cross is raised, fall as it falls, criss-cross to denote Pilate's indecision, and are circling and round when he is placed in his mother's arms.

These are not accidents, nor painted to puzzle the uninitiated, but an attempt to make line and colour do their legitimate work of telling the story by means of their own power and emphasis, which brings it over more forcibly than mere illustration can do. They awaken, and keep awake, the interest of the drama, so that we don't go to sleep over it half way through, but follow with interest to the end. For example, the colour is sometimes almost unreal to astonish us, and keep us aware of this almost inconceivable event - God, in the nature of man, dying to redeem mankind.

One could view this terrible theme from many aspects. I have tried to keep the intensity by simply choosing two. One is that Christ is so alone in this undertaking. Only he could have done it. So I have concentrated on his solitary figure, carrying on, carrying it through. The other aspect is that all this is according to his will. This is what he came on earth to do. It is not thrust upon him. He is the master of ceremonies, and with purposefulness and strength he carries out the task - a strength that is as great as his gentleness. The text I kept in mind is "Quia ipse voluit" (the only answer to the problem of pain)"

Recent History

Sheila Mullany recalls a number of events in the 1950s which placed the cathedral in the forefront. There were the elaborate Eucharistic processions down Adderley Street during the Eucharistic Congress, which concluded at the front of the cathedral with exposition and adoration.

There was also the visit of Cardinal de Gouveia around 1960 - the first resident African Cardinal to visit South Africa, and the garden tea parties hosted in his honour. Sheila recalls the excitement at meeting a Cardinal for the first time.

In 1950 the Episcopal consecration of Owen McCann as apostolic Vicar of Cape Town was celebrated at an open air Mass next to the cathedral to mark the occasion. Peter Foley, who was in attendance at the Mass, recalls that the Master of Arms for that occasion was Mgr Galvin.

Parishioners of the cathedral rose to the challenge, Sheila recalls, when they hosted residents of Tristan Da Cunha when their island experienced a volcanic eruption in August 1961.

Another highlight was the presentation of the Stations of the Cross - painted by Maud Sumner - to St Mary's in 1962 by Mrs A Powers, presented in memory of her late husband.

In 1965 Archbishop Owen McCann was named a Cardinal, the first for South Africa. Peter Foley tells of the regular papal Masses celebrated annually by the Cardinal and attended by dignitaries, recalling the seats reserved for diplomats and the papal flag being carried in procession by members of the Knights of Da Gama.

In 1966, District Six - the hub and hugely stable base of the parish - was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950. This began the displacement of that community.

Sheila Mullany recalls that the cathedral parish was an open church - open in that it reflected the cultural diversity of the then local Cape Town community and open in that people had access to the church at almost any given time.

She recalls teaching catechism at the Catholic Institute, preparing scores of children for first Holy Communion and doing parish visitation in District Six. The face of those who attended Holy Mass at the cathedral changed drastically with the forced removals of mainly coloured people to various parts of the Cape Flats. This would mark the beginning of a parish community in transit.

The introduction of the first paschal meal by Fr Roger Hickey, Sheila recalls, was hugely successful. These were initially held at St Mary's Primary School every second year and have since been held at Nazareth House in the parish room.

Also during Fr Hickley's tenure at the cathedral, Margie Cook recalls a rather unique nativity display erected in the guise of an informal settlement, and how "one had to duck under washing to get to it, in what is now the Sacrament Chapel" Since her arrival in the parish in 1978, Margie Cook noticed how

initially there were lots of families with young children and that there were more than two hundred children attending catechism at Villa Maria on Saturdays and at the Cathedral on Sundays. There were enough children, she adds, to have a class for each grade. Later, parents voted to have catechism on Saturdays at the cathedral only.

In rather short succession, the cathedral witnessed the appointment and installation of Archbishop Stephen Naidoo in 1984 and Archbishop Lawrence Henry in 1990. The funerals of Archbishop Naidoo and Cardinal McCann, in 1989 and 1994 respectively, once again thrust the cathedral into the forefront. These events were attended by foreign dignitaries and local politicians alike. Both prelates are buried in the cathedral. Above the tombstone at the entrance of the Sacrament Chapel hangs the red hat of the Cardinal with its distinctive tassels.

With the political changes in the country, the cathedral became a place of worship visited by tourists, changing the composition of the worshipping community from being a very Cape community, as Sheila would put it, to an internationally cosmopolitan community.

The prolific succession of Administrators at the cathedral also brought with it a variety of changes and new ideas - each Administrator contributing meaningfully to its life. None were perhaps more noticeable than the restoration of the cathedral, initiated and completed by Mgr Andrew Borello between 1999 and 2000. This brought about liturgical changes enhanced by well-executed structural changes.

With the steady influx of foreign nationals from other African countries, the cathedral community took on yet another dimension. The introduction of the African Day Mass has seen the community enriched and celebrated in a distinctively African cosmopolitan spirit. Other community-building experiences, Sheila Mullany remembers, is Renew in the 1990s, and the Alpha Programme which started just after the year 2000.

References:

1. The Cathedral Church of Our Lady of the Flight into Egypt, p. 8.
2. www.districtsix.co.za
3. Cathedral Memories, by M. Cook.

Submitted by Fr Christian Frantz